

Student Scholarship Essays from MABS' 2017 Fall Conference

As a requirement for receiving a scholarship to the conference, recipients must submit a one-page essay about their experience at the conference, how the presentations relate to their studies and what they might do with the information in the future.



The Mid-Atlantic Biofeedback Society is pleased to share the essays from the four student scholarship recipients at our 2017 Fall Conference.

Hayley Hoffman **Northwestern University, Pursuing a Masters of Art in Clinical Counseling**

The October 2016 Mid-Atlantic Biofeedback Conference offered a primer on "Interpersonal Biofeedback" and "Using Biofeedback in K-12 classrooms" based on the research and experience of presenter Steven Kassel. Mr. Kassel began his career in biofeedback in the mid-80's and subsequently obtained licensure in Marriage and Family Therapy. It is this particular hybrid of psychodynamic therapy and neuroscience that attracted the author to the conference. The potential benefits of understanding psychophysiological responses about a significant other suggest that there is a need for new and ongoing research in the area of interpersonal biofeedback.

Mr. Kassel's morning presentation focused on the fusion of psychodynamic family therapy and peripheral biofeedback. After a brief, though comprehensive, review of the history of Family and Marriage Therapy, Mr. Kassel focused on the differentiation of self, referencing the work of Bowen and Jung. In his words, using a biofeedback orientation "Differentiation allows for emotional plasticity and ecology; a better ability to shift gears" (Kassel, 2016). Using biofeedback in work with couples offers contemporary family therapists evidence-based support of the physiological changes that occur as couples interact. Individuals under stress have a biochemical response; the amygdala processes emotions, particularly fear and anger, triggering a fight/flight response. Awareness of the physiological responses enables clients to learn self-regulating skills resulting in the creation of new neural pathways to the prefrontal cortex, or cognitive brain lobe.

Imago Therapy was the model of MFT that attracted the author to clinical practice. Increased neuroscience research supporting the principles of why individuals are attracted to specific partners and how dyads respond under stress validates 25 years of Imago practice. Much of the data produced in biofeedback sessions is obtained in psychodynamic or dialogical sessions with couples. Using biofeedback to provide direct information facilitates immediacy in implementing self-regulating interventions such as diaphragmatic breathing, meditation, and mindfulness, as well as validation and empathy. Further exposure to biofeedback in practice would be welcomed. Networking with other conference attendees provided connections with Imago Therapists who have expressed willingness to share their experience and future endeavors in exploring the use of biofeedback combined with couples in Imago Therapy.

It is with an appreciation for MABS and their kind consideration in extending scholarships for student attendees, that the author was able to participate in the conference. While biofeedback is not a new field of study, it is gaining traction in the MFT arena and makes a significant contribution to supporting evidence-based research and practice in combination with more traditionally accepted psychodynamic therapy.

References:

Kassel, S.C. (2016). Interpersonal Biofeedback; Hybrid of two evidence-based therapies. *Mid-Atlantic Society for Biofeedback and Behavioral Medicine*. [ppp].

Kassel, S.C. & Lemay, J. (2015). Interpersonal Biofeedback: Biofeedback in a relationship context. *Biofeedback*, 43/4, pp.153-157.

(Minor editing done by Bea Haskins, MS, MABS' Executive Director)

Kristin Holdaway
Messiah College, Pursuing a Masters in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

This conference struck my interest when I first read about it via an e-mail my school had sent me stating that we could meet our conference requirement by going this conference. I have always had an interest in the mind and how the mind works. Mental illness affects each and every one of us who have it differently. Though this conference was focused on the effects of interpersonal biofeedback on couples and biofeedback in the schools, it was still very applicable to me as a future counselor.

What I found most interesting about this conference were the live demonstrations. It was extremely interesting to see how the process worked once the two volunteers were hooked up. The volunteers had to act out a scenario but still made for interesting learning material. It was also interesting to see how much the mind had to do with biofeedback. Our minds control our bodies and I was intrigued to learn that in order for biofeedback to be successful one almost has to retrain their brain and body to react differently than it normally would. I also enjoyed the almost cognitive behavioral perspective this conference took. It was pointed out at the conference that it is about teaching people about the power of being able to have control of their own environment to be more aware of their reactions to situations and then to control those reactions in a way that is positive, not negative.

I also found it interesting that this sort of concept was taught in schools to children. I do believe that we should be teaching students how to appropriately respond to stress but I was surprised to see how detailed the lesson plan was. This was interesting to me because as a future counselor I can teach my clients how to properly relax and how to tell when they are tense. Of course this may require some training on my part. The effects of this type of teaching being integrated in to the schools could be monumental. Students can successfully have lower test anxiety and lower responses to stress about such things as projects and homework.

When I think about keeping this in mind for the future, I do not necessarily think about buying the equipment or becoming a specialist in this area. I would like to incorporate some of the CBT based techniques in to my future practice as a counselor. I can teach my clients to relax and quite possibly teach them to calm down before going in to full fight or flight mode. This will allow my clients to see situations more clearly and therefore handle future problems better. Currently I will be doing research on biofeedback for a research paper for my marriage, couple, and family counseling class. I am looking to learn more about biofeedback and how it works on different people and in different cultures. Furthermore I can use what I learned at the conference and apply it to other disorders that pervade our society. Many struggle with anxiety and depression and I am curious as to whether or not biofeedback can help those with anxiety and the like stay calm instead of going in to a panicked anxious state.

In conclusion, I learned a great deal from this conference and am excited to pursue further research on the topic in my classes and quite possibly in the future when I graduate and find a job.

Pamela Jules
Argosy University, Masters in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

I first have to thank the Mid-Atlantic Biofeedback Society for granting me a scholarship to come and participate in the fall conference. I was exposed to an incredibly seasoned and successful group of individuals who were eager and gracious to share their evidence-based experience with me. With respect to both neurofeedback and biofeedback, I was given information that will both help me in my future treatment of clients and evidence-based studies to assist me as I apply for grants.

The conference was interesting because I have never been exposed to biofeedback, neurofeedback is my specialty but I really wanted to understand how both complement each other. In the first half of the conference, Steven Kassel gave a historical overview of the development of family theories in conjunction with definitions. This overview will help me when I take my NCE in April, 2017 because the slides provided, consolidate review information.

Moreover, prior to lunch, Steven Kassel gave a demonstration on how biofeedback can help couples understand how their interaction impacts the other, in a measurable, accurate, and immediate way. The protocol used, sparked conversation regarding the effectiveness and application. I thought the demonstration was excellent even though it was acting. The couples were not in crisis nor did they know each other; however, if this protocol is used for couples who are in crisis, this method allows the clinician to refocus the couple based on the feedback the couple can analyze. In addition, the biofeedback can give the clinician necessary response data about the individual's strengths or weaknesses within the relationship, especially during high stress interactions. Again, I have not been exposed to biofeedback prior to this conference and I had the good fortune of sitting next to Dr. Elsie Ferguson. Dr. Ferguson was gracious enough to explain how the biofeedback results are interpreted and why the interpretations are important to the client as well as the clinician in therapy. I may choose to use this biofeedback protocol later, once I get my neurofeedback practice established as it is another effective tool.

The second half of the conference outlined biofeedback research conducted in schools and with students ages K -12. Steven Kassel outlined the history of biofeedback in schools and how effective biofeedback has been for students. I am very interested in any funded studies done with children using biofeedback and neurofeedback because I am currently seeking funding for my practice. I work under the direction of Bob Frederick in Acworth, GA, and he accepts students who are referrals from the local elementary and middle schools. We see an average of three students weekly, on a pro bono basis. The results have been positive regarding behavior, grades, and socialization. The latest case involved a six year old foster child who displayed inappropriate sexual behavior with peers, night terrors, and lack of concentration in the classroom. The child was in foster care and was molested in the home prior to foster care.

Moreover, after six treatments, the child has improved in self-control, night terrors have stopped, and the child's grades have improved since the beginning of the year.

Therefore, I will take the information Steven Kassel provided and the resources from the professionals I networked with, to make a difference in my community, with my client, in the counseling profession, and among my colleagues.

Mary Straub Pargas
Eastern Mennonite University, Pursuing a Masters of Arts in
the Graduate Counseling Program

As a certified yoga therapist and a graduate student in counseling, I was looking forward to learning about biofeedback and its connection to the traditional studies of yoga and meditation, and how modern technology can be used in counseling. I am interested in how biofeedback can inexpensively, effectively, and simply be brought to low income populations to teach and experience breath rate, heart rate variability, and coherence. At my university counseling center internship site, we recently purchased sensors and software to provide biofeedback as a service to students. I decided to dedicate my graduate school research project to biofeedback, anxiety, and psychophysiological changes.

I was honored to receive a scholarship from the Mid-Atlantic Biofeedback Society to attend their fall conference on October 15, 2016, at no cost. As a beginner to biofeedback, I arrived with basic knowledge, and eagerness to learn more. I was immediately impressed with the organization and professionalism of the conference. Most of all, every person greeted me personally, with a smile and an open heart to share a wealth and lifetime of experiences. I met members who have worked all over the world, dedicating their lives to biofeedback/neurofeedback in the service of helping those who are suffering. I was able to browse a support table with biofeedback equipment, books, manuals, etc.

The guest speaker, Steven Kassel, MFT, from W. Los Angeles and Santa Clarita, CA, was a vivacious presenter with a wealth of experience. He taught about the history of biofeedback and the therapeutic approach to his Interpersonal Biofeedback. He also provided information on research and case studies. His couples' therapy biofeedback presentation was most helpful. He taught and demonstrated how a couple, which is actively connected to biofeedback, can see on the monitor the moment one individual goes into fight or flight mode. The therapist can teach exercises to bring both couples back into balance, then re-approach the topic again. This can go back and forth, a powerful therapeutic moment of rupture and repair, that can happen in the counseling office with the guidance of the therapist. The couple experiences the bodily felt sensation/experience_of the rupture and repair, and also sees and learns what the other is experiencing. The couple is quickly and effectively healing attachment wounds that are in the unconscious, or beyond words and understanding. The couple actively practices and learns techniques that support a mind-body theoretical approach to healing.

The afternoon session on biofeedback in the schools was interesting but less relevant to my interests.

I plan to attend the Fall and Spring Conference every year. The knowledge I gained and the connections I made were invaluable.

(Edited by Bea Haskins, MS, MABS' Executive Director)